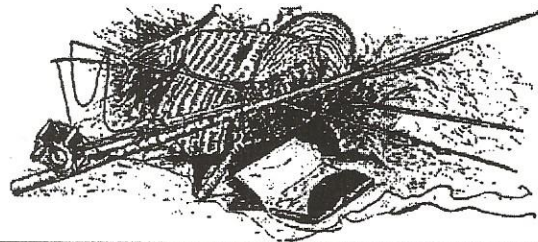
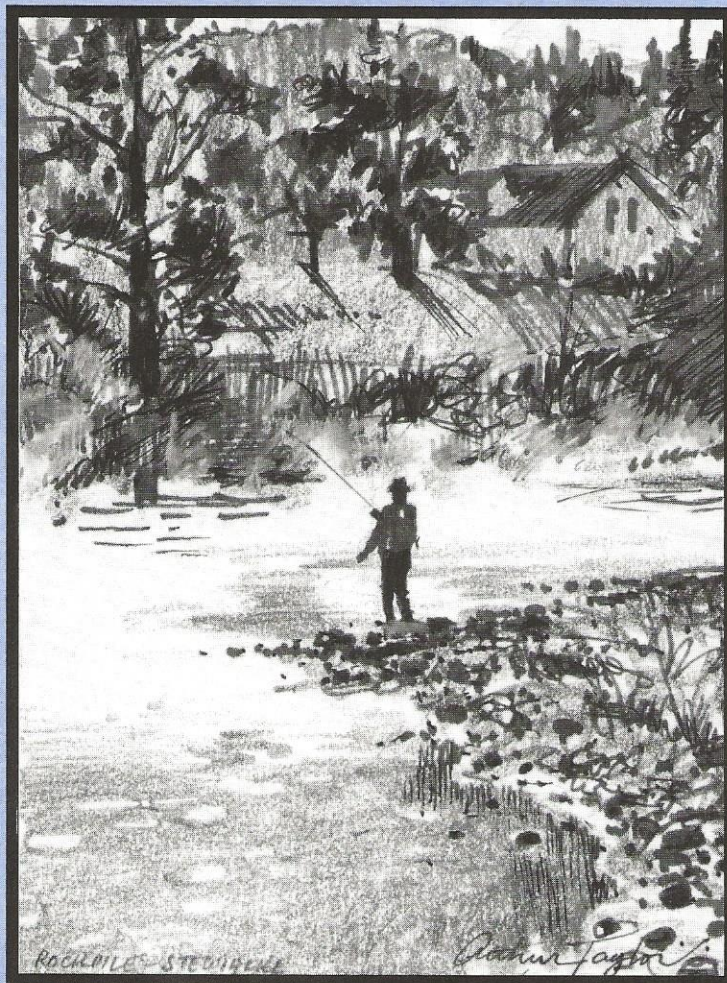


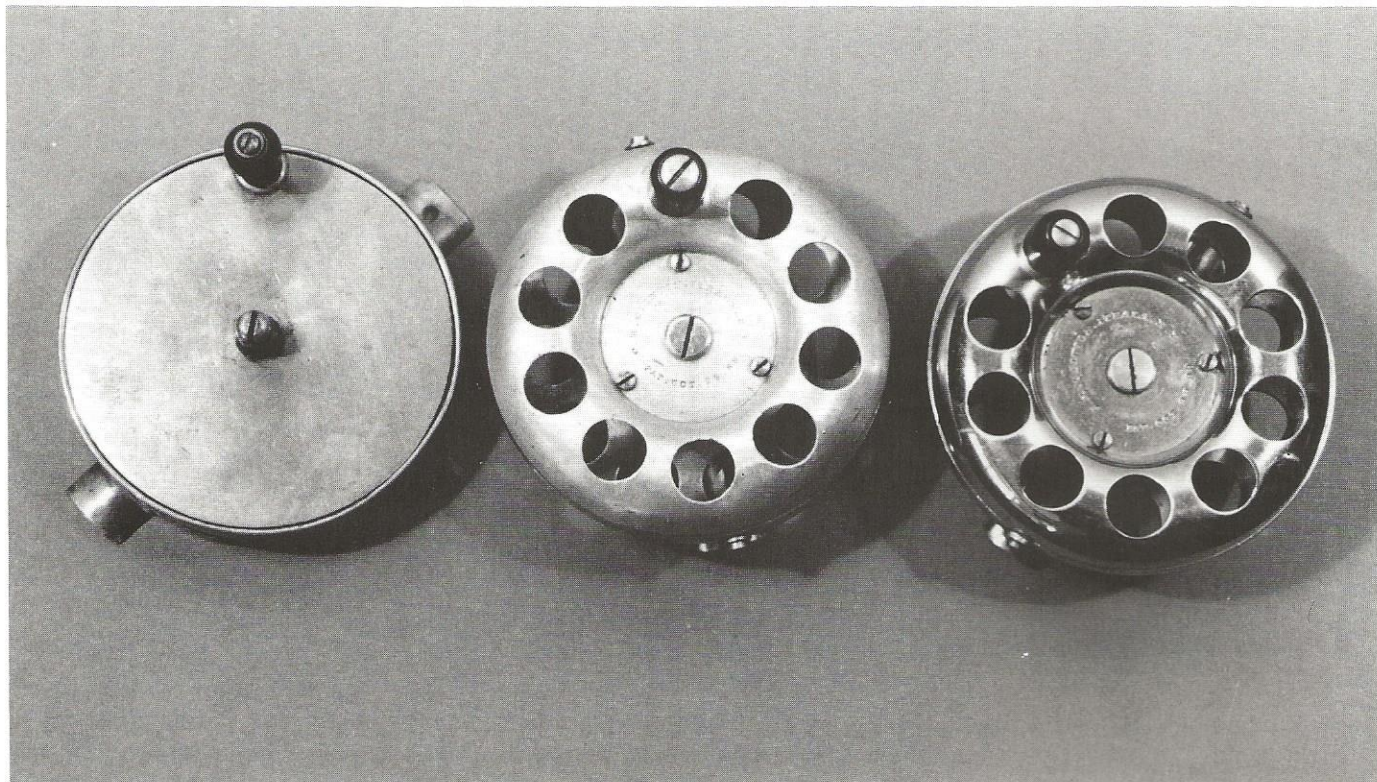
Fishing Collectibles *Magazine*



SPRING 1994 ISSUE

VOLUME FIVE NUMBER FOUR #20





A Morgan James reel (left) and two Clinton reels.

Morgan James Renown Gunmaker and Reelmaker

by H. J. Swinney

(Editor's note: The following information includes excerpts from "The Gunmakers of Utica" A Paper presented to the Oneida County Historical Society on April 13, 1967 by H. J. Swinney, Director, The Adirondack Museum. The Paper relates historical facts about the early gunmaker of the Utica area. One of those makers was Morgan James, a renowned gunmaker and maker of at least two of the finest examples of early side-mounted reels discovered to date.

The Morgan James reel is an exquisite little reel measuring a mere 2-5/8 inches in diameter and is only a 1/2 inch in depth. The reel is made of brass and displays flawless

workmanship. There is fine even beading on two rims and the knob is delicately turned. Of the two examples known, one, the inscribed one has an ivory knob and the plain reel possesses a dark hardwood knob.

The James reel I own, the plain one, has a plain iron screw in the center of the spool which when removed shows a simple click type drag under the spool. The spool is enclosed by the frame and a one inch opening to allow the line to feed. The machined foot is attached by two small brass screws.

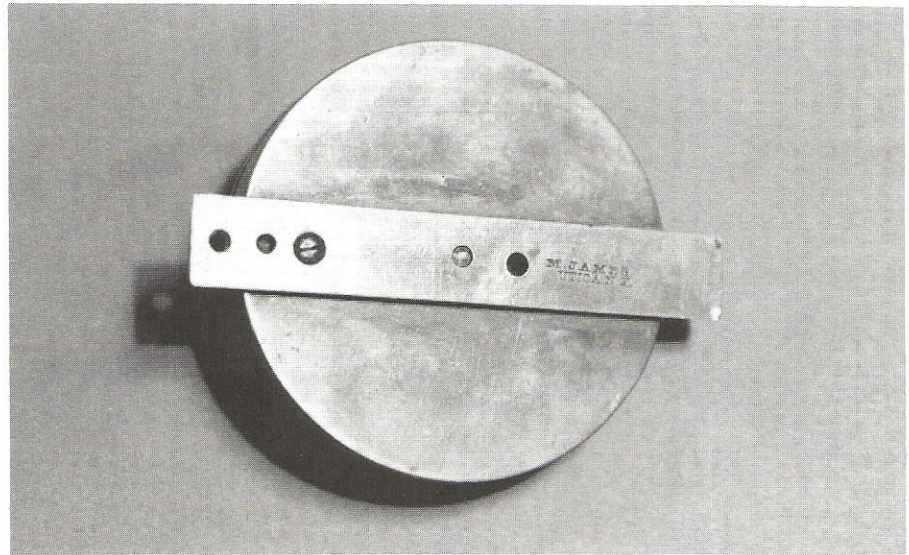
The first Morgan James reel came to light at a 1986 Oliver auction. The reel was inscribed Greene Smith

Presented by M. James and it came with a letter, dated 1864, from Greene Smith who at the time was a Civil War officer. The second Morgan reel was offered at a 1989 Bourne auction. Interestingly, the description states the reel is one of five known when only two have been identified as of this date. The marking on the second reel is stamped "M. James - Utica, N. Y." which would establish the reel as being made sometime between 1841 and 1863 according to the facts stated in Swinney's dissertation and the assumption that gunsmiths would be more likely making guns than fishing reels during the Civil War.

Please also note the mention of Mr. Billinghamurst of Rochester, New York as a famous gunmaker who is obviously the same maker of the famous Billinghamurst reels. This article highlights the fact that in the nineteenth century, gunmakers and gunsmiths quite often also made fishing tackle, not unlike one of the most renowned examples, Hiram Leonard. My thanks to H. J. Swinney, the author of this paper and to the gentleman who was kind enough to send me this little piece of history which will be preserved for future collectors interested in early gun and tackle makers. *Editor*)

"It is curious to see in the city directories, the way that these (gunmaker) shops were fairly often moved. For example, in Utica, Morgan James was at 21 Bleecker in 1842, 11 Bleecker 1843-46, 4 Bleecker in 1850, 11 Fayette ("corner of Seneca") in 1851 and 24 Liberty in 1867. See Utica city directories for these dates. (In this and subsequent cases, directories of Utica are cited only with the year concerned as it appears in the title. A full file is available at the Utica Public Library.)"

"But the most interesting of Utica gunmakers, at least to me, the man who was the finest workman and yet led a curiously tragic life first appears in the Utica directories in 1832. This is Morgan James, about whom there is much confusion because he was the son (probably) of a man of the same name. His father, a shoemaker and shoe last maker, appears in the directories of 1817 and 1828, but in 1829 there is only the meaningful listing "Mrs. Ann James, widow of Morgan." In 1832, a Morgan James reappears as a gunsmith, but the fact that this is not the earlier man of that name is confirmed by later listings of Morgan James the gunsmith's age in the United States Census, which makes it clear that he was born about 1815. In 1832, James lived with Riley



The back of the stamped Morgan James reel.

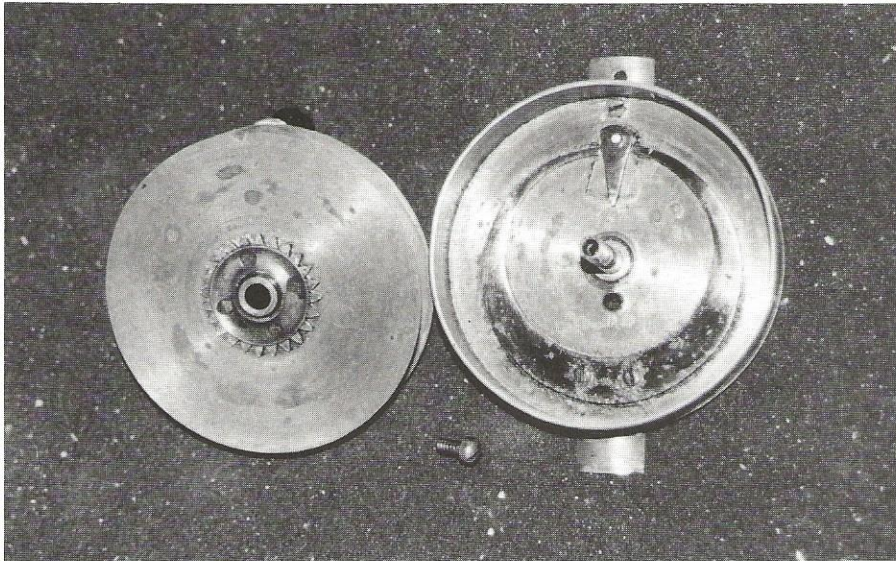
Rogers, which means that he was Rogers' apprentice.

Although he was born in Oneida County, according to the census records, his name certainly stamps him as a Welshman by descent. There are slight variations in his age as listed in the various Census records, but he was born not far from 1815 one way or the other, and he was therefore about 15 years old in 1830, when he probably began his apprenticeship.

From the guns he made even when he was a young man, and also from the opinion of his contemporaries, we know that Morgan James was a very superior workman. It seems safe to assume that he must have shown a special aptitude for the trade even as an apprentice boy. There is also some slight evidence, as we shall see later, that his was a difficult personality. These two things may be the explanation for his sudden disappearance from the Utica records in 1837, when Morgan's master, Riley Rogers, also disappears and his shop reverts to his presumed son Elisha Rogers. I suspect that Elisha Rogers, who had begun his apprenticeship two years later than Morgan, now needed nothing less around his shop than an

expert workman two years older than himself who also possessed an aggressive personality. My guess is that Elisha Rogers fired Morgan James out of hand.

But for whatever reason, Morgan is gone from the Utica directories until 1842, which probably means he got back in 1841; and please mark the date, because it is significant. At that time he reappeared and opened his own shop, and from that time on, he was a famous workman. Most interestingly, he was among the earliest makers in this country of telescopic rifle sights, and of this we have excellent documentary evidence. In 1848, John Ratcliffe Chapman, an English-born civil engineer, published his now-rare book Instructions to Young Marksmen, ... as Exhibited in the Improved American Rifle (New York, 1848). Chapman, who signed his preface from "Oneida Lake, Madison County, New York," says that the "...outline and greater part of the text were originally written in the fall and winter of 1844." He had good things to say about Morgan James: "In the manufacture of telescopic sights, such as I have previously described, I beg to recommend M. James, rifle manufacturer, Utica. He is a first-



The inside of a Morgan James reel.

rate 'working mechanic,' and having been employed by me in all work connected with the telescopic sight, an give better satisfaction, 'having been through the mill' - than those who have not. In the manufacture of rifles, Edwin Wesson, of Northboro, Massachusetts, stands first in public estimation...It would at the same time be unfair not to state the merits of such makers as Fish of New York; James, of Utica; Billinghamurst of Rochester, and many others."

In an explanatory footnote, Chapman says specifically that these are among the words written in 1844, and not at the later time of publication.

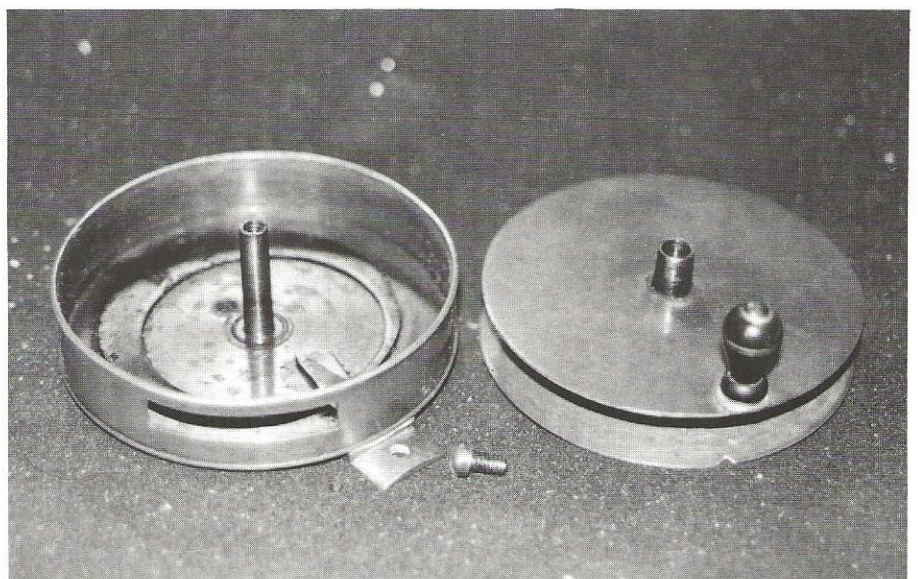
Thus, in 1844, when Morgan James was still less than 30 years old, he was already not only a telescope maker but was among those whom Chapman, the authority, thought were the finest riflemakers of the day. That he was also a superlative marksman is demonstrated by targets reproduced in Chapman's book, and there is also shown a target made with a James rifle, which Chapman says is the finest target at that range which he ever knew to be made.

A question now arises: where did James acquire the skill which made him so superior a workman at so early an age? I do not know, but I have a guess, and the guess involves a lot of shaky and circumstantial evidence. Perhaps you will be interested in following the chain of reasoning with me - weak link by weak link.

When Morgan James left Utica, as we believe he did because of his

disappearance from the directories in 1836, I assume he went to Litchfield, Connecticut. The evidence for that is in a rifle, owned by Mr. Glade Keith, which is marked on the top flat of the barrel "M. James, Litchfield, Conn." There is further evidence in the next gun, also from Mr. Keith's collection, which is, as you will see, very similar indeed, but which is marked (although the marks are now very faint) "M. James, Utica, New York." I submit that it safe to assume that these two guns were made by the same hand, and that together they form evidence that the Morgan James of Utica, New York, was the Morgan James of Litchfield, Connecticut. I think the first was made in Litchfield during the years between 1837 and 1841, and the second was made in Utica before Morgan left - or, just possibly, just after he returned, about 1841.

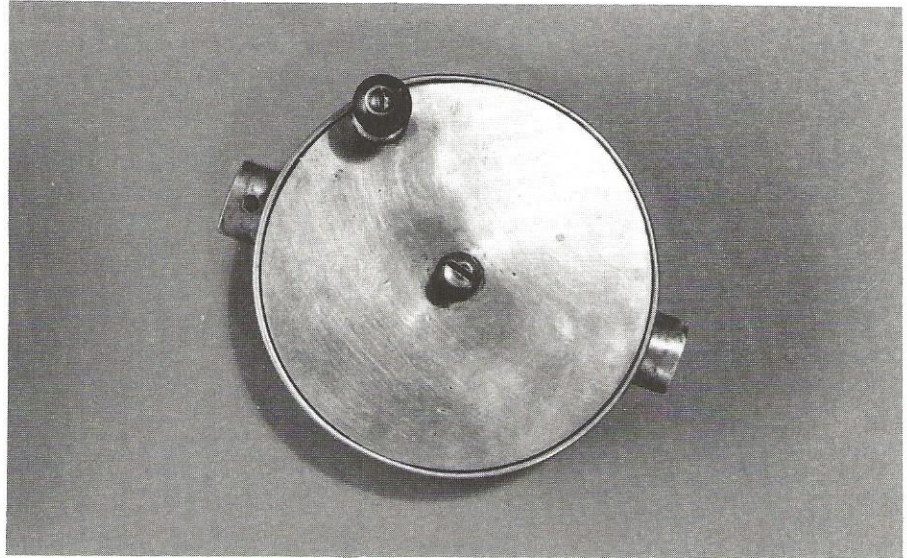
Second, and an even less tangible piece of evidence, is Morgan James' reported and acknowledged superb skill as a maker of target rifles after his return to Utica just after 1840. Normally, such skill would come with years of experience, but Morgan was only 25 or 26 when he



A side view of the Morgan James reel.

opened his own shop. Where did his skill come from? Very plausibly from the experience of rifling thousands of barrels for Hollister in the preceding three years, more barrels than an ordinary gunsmith would see in a lifetime of experience. This fragile chain of evidence and inference may very well be flawed, I freely confess, but at least it offers a possible, if not necessarily probable, explanation of where this young Utican was in the late 1830's, how he came to be there, and why Chapman spoke of him in such glowing terms in 1844.

How much good Chapman's praise did for James I do not know, but there is no doubt that in the period between the 1840's and the 1860's James was at the top of his trade. You have only to look at one or two of his fine rifles to realize that these are the work of a very sure hand indeed. Furthermore, some of his success can be traced through the records. In 1850, according to the Federal Census, he and his wife and two children were boarders in the home of one Bethuil (or Bethiel) White; but when the State Census was taken in 1855, he lived in the third ward in a frame house of a value of \$1,000, and his shop employed five hands (including himself) and produced 100 guns and rifles annually to the value of \$2,000. By 1860, he was calling himself a master gunsmith in the Census - a phrase which very few people used - and although he now had on \$800 worth of real property, he had \$1,000 invested in the shop and was making 175 rifles annually. By 1865, he had dignified himself with the title of "riflemaker" in contrast to "gunsmith," as practically every other such workman in the state called himself. He still lived in the third ward of the city, but he now had a brick house valued at \$6,000 which was by far the most expensive dwelling anywhere in the immediate neighborhood. His wife had died and he had married again, a girl 28



Another view of Morgan James' fine work.

years younger than himself, and although his oldest daughter was already 17, his little son Morgan Junior was only 10 months old.

But he was close to the end of his career. In 1868 he vanishes from the Utica directories; I thought he had died and I searched Utica papers for a long time for an obituary without success. Finally, it was Mr. Marvin Salls of Ilion who provided me with the clue. I then located Morgan James in the 1870 Census, not in Utica, but working for the Remington Arms Company in Ilion, and living in the village of Mohawk, apparently in a small house in a poor district. The story is completely told by his obituary and the subsequent editorial and card of thanks, all from the Ilion Citizen, and I would like to acknowledge that it was Mr. Salls who found these quotations and sent them to me. On November 29, 1878, the Ilion Citizen published a brief obituary: "Died in this village November 28, 1878, Morgan James, aged 65 years." (Actually, he was probably nearer 63.) The explanation followed on December 6th when the paper editorialized as follows: "A sad end, one who knows says, that the late Morgan James, who was burried [sic] Sunday last by

charity was one of the many victims of that class who say I can stop when I please. It is but a few years since a sportsman would not look at a gun unless the name of Morgan James, Maker, N.Y., was stamped on it. He dropped an enviable reputation and prosperous business. Choosing in their stead a life of dissipation [sic] and poverty to be picked up by a former employe (this was George Ferriss) who today ranks among the first on the list of gunmakers in the country. That this sad end might be a lesson to our youth they [sic] might ask themselves the question, whither are we drifting."

Finally on December 13, the Citizen published this:

"Card of thanks - by Henry and Elizabeth Mushen for those who helped in preparation for the funeral of Morgan James who died at their home. To Mr. Twist for kindness and liberal offers; Mr. Chattaway for conducting the funeral; Reverend Lyle (Presbyterian) for funeral services; Mrs. Philo Remington for flowers; and the workmen of the Armory for paying respects and going to the grave. Henry and Elizabeth Mushen, 10 Remington Avenue."